



Uganda: War And Sexual Based Violence in the North

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Analysis

Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) became involved in Uganda in 1979. This was immediately after the "Liberation war" which saw the departure of Idi Amin's regime.

The first programme was in the North of the Country based in Gulu district. ACORD was majorly responding to the emergency needs as a result of the war. ACORD has now expanded its programme in the whole of Acholi sub region, Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, West Nile sub region, Adjumani and Moyo and the Western part of the country Mbarara programme all under ACORD in Uganda programme. The main intervention currently is focusing on developmental issues and to address the injustices in service delivery by using the right based approach to development as a strategy. ACORD is also engaged in Advocacy and Lobbying for the voice less society in the region to present their issues to the policy makers for a better life. In 2004, ACORD conducted a research to find out the relationship between HIV/AIDS and Sexual and Gender Based Violence. The result of the study showed very strong linkages between the two.

The war in Northern Uganda started in August, 1986 when the Ex-UNLA soldiers who fled into Sudan following their defeat by the National Resistant Army (NRA). In January they crossed back into Uganda and attacked NRA detachments in Gulu district. The attackers returned under the auspices of Uganda Peoples' Democratic Movement/Army (UPDM/A). This report was presented by; Charles Asowa Okwe Makerere University-Kampala during a two days international conference that was organized by ACORD in February 1997. This event opened a volatile situation in as far as security in Uganda was

concerned. The war resulted to massive population dislocation as people flee from the war zones to the safer areas within their districts and beyond.

In some of the affected districts, the situation was more pathetic. People were not only displaced, but some were forced to commute between their homes and trading and urban centers on a daily basis. Children as young as two years old used to commute from their homes to the trading centers looking for shelter. The situation increased cases of defilement and rape as young girls were at the mercy of the older men for material support. The younger boys were too being exploited by older women and sugar mummies and being promised easy life if they accepted their demands.

In the course of this war, family life has inevitably suffered most. Parents were separated from each other or from their children. In some cases other members of the families were caught up in cross fire and got killed or maimed. As a result, the problems of orphans, disability and trauma have emerged in the region. The most affected social groups are women and children. Often defenseless, these people have been victims of abduction, rape and other forms of abuses meted out by the rebels and other parties involved.

The 22 years conflict has recorded the "worse humanitarian crisis" a statement by Jan the representative of the UN during his visit in Northern Uganda. There were high levels of human right abuse which greatly affected women in the war zone. The women are still experiencing, psychological, spiritual and physical health trauma as a result of the long conflict in the region.

Young Women were abducted indiscriminately and the young girls were defiled, rape and given to the rebel commanders as wives without any objection. They were also trained as soldiers to fight in the battle field with the Uganda Peoples Defense Army. Many lost their lives while others who tried to escape were killed when others are looking. The abductees were always picked randomly to carry out the killing of those who tried to escape as a psychological tool to scare the others from escaping

"Young Girls were defiled, raped and made pregnant by the so called husbands and delivered in the bush without any proper medical attention. The young women fought with their babies at their back, others were killed in the cross fire and the lucky ones found their ways to escape and came back home". The young women lamented.

Back home, the young women, are still faced with sexual abuse, psychological, Emotional and economic violence both from the family members and the community. The kind of life still reminds them of the nasty experience they went through while in captivity. They all have a similar condition and stories to tell about their problems and that is why they believe that the only solution to their problems is for the government and NGOs is recognize their problems and also provide them with protection and compensation in order for them to settle with their children.

Majority could not go back to school although some of them are still interested but can not afford due to lack of money. All these young mothers were at school by the time of

the abduction. Some of them were abducted on the way to school, back home, while others abducted at night from their homes during the raid in the villages by the rebels.

In Ongako, one of the sub-county where ACORD operates, 42 child mothers shared their experiences while in the bush and they had this to say;

"Ocwee Rose, not real name said she was abducted in 1992 and stayed in the bush for 7 years. Rose said she was just a very young girl by the time of the abduction. While in the bush, Rose was given to one of the commanders to be her care taker as well as a husband. By the time she escaped and came back home, she already had a child and was also pregnant with the man. While on her way back home, she stepped on a foot land mine that affected both legs and was rescued and taken to the hospital. With GOD's Grace, she later on had a successful delivery. She is now disabled and moving with crutches for support. Rose decided to get married to another man and now has got 3 children with him making five including the one's she came with. Rose said she had a lot of mistreatment from this man and worse still he has decided to marry two more ladies after her. His friends and family members are now telling him to chest her away from his home because she is a rebel. Rose said she cannot now go back home with all this children because she lost both parents. She is even worried that her relatives will not allow her to settle in their land with these children even if she decided to go back home."

"Aber Monica said she was abducted three times. The first time she was on her way to school and stayed in captivity for two and half years before she could escape and come back home. Her mother decided to take her to one of the Catholic Mission to stay with the Nuns for her safety. But after some time, Monica said she decided to come back home and was abducted again for the second time. I was known to be braved and fight so well while in the bush and that is why they kept on following me, she said. Monica went and stayed for one year before she could again escape but before she could stay any longer than she was abducted for the third time. Monica's role was to always be on the alert by climbing trees to spy on the enemy and each time she sense a danger, she shoots the first bullet to alert the rest to take cover or run away before she can follow them. She did this several times and she was such a free lady who was not so much guarded. This kind of freedom gave her the opportunity to escape from the rebels. She said she lost one of her close friend in the battle field and was now taking care of her daughter which she could not leave behind. Monica got married but faced with the same problems of violence in the home from her husband and the relatives. Fortunately or unfortunately she

Some of the contributing factors to the high levels of sexual and gender based violence include war and displacement, poverty, HIV/AIDS, culture and tradition, limited availability of resources such as food, changes in gender roles as women became the bread winner, collapse of traditional society and family support, too much consumption of alcohol, design or social structure of the camp among others.

The consequences of sexual and gender based violence in the internally displaced camps is associated with psychological/emotional outcome like post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, mental illness, suicidal thoughts, depression and many others. The social

outcomes of sexual and gender based violence results to social rejection and isolation, social stigma, rejection by husband and community etc. Other non-fatal outcomes will include unwanted pregnancy like for the case of the child mothers, STI including HIV/AIDS, disability, injury to mention but a few.

Among the women I talked to, only few managed to come through the rehabilitation centers like GUSCO, World Vision International Caritas and other CSOs who were at that time providing counseling and material support to the formerly abducted children. After staying for some months at the center, the children were then re-united with their relatives and care taker. Some of them did not get the opportunity to come back home through the counseling center which made it very difficult for them to cope up with the home life.

By the time of my interaction with them, almost all the child mothers tried to get new husbands but could managed to stay because of the violence caused by the men and the frequent stigmatization and name calling from the community and have decided to remain single. The young women said they have always been abused as "rebels not fit to be wives because they have committed atrocities and their children too should not mix with other children". This kind of attitudes the women feel has resulted to discrimination of the formally abducted children who should have instead been incorporated in the society.

The young mothers said they are denied financial support by their husbands because of the other children they came back with from captivity. The men according them beat up the children which from time to time bringing violence between them with a lot of bitterness in their hearts. The child mothers said it was not their interest to go to the bush to join the rebels, so why should they and their children be treated like that. The men they produced with while in the bush were just given to them forcefully without a choice and there fore should not be blamed for that. No woman will ever leave her child behind even in difficult times and that is why they have decided to come home with them, the women lamented. Some of the men where killed while others remained in the bush and since they did not know where their homes are and were not introduced officially, they cannot trace the family of the father of their children.

The constant stigma and discrimination and the name-calling is something that the returnees have been subjected to which needs to be addressed. Even if these women try to abandon their marriages because of the constant violence, back in their families and neighbors they still face the same kind of attitude.

There are increased reports of rape/defilement in the affected districts from both the Police and NGOs, largely as a result of increases sensitization to gradually break the silence of the issue. A total of 116 cases were reported by COOPI, one of the implementing partners during the SGBV sub cluster meeting that happened between April and August 2007. The survivors suffered from trauma and physical damage and at risk of unwanted pregnancy and HIV/AIDS infection. In case of pregnancy the girls drop out of school and face stigma from their friends, families and the community.

Psychosocial support in this case is very essential together with specific skills to work with the survivors, their families and communities. Some of the NGOs including ACORD have been responding to these in their operational areas, but the demand has increased due to the inadequate service providers in the District as well as referrals from the few specialized interventions. There is need to expand response coverage in particular within an effective district referral system.

The low status society attaches to women is the major cause of domestic violence, a right activist has said. "Right from the day a girl is born to the time she completes school, society looks at her as inferior" Said Hope Tuyasingura, a director at the centre for domestic violence prevention. In Acholi culture for example, children are given names according to the situation and usually most names are associated with SGBV like "Akanyo" meaning the woman has gone through a lot of hardship.

The situation in Northern Uganda is now improving with people moving back from the mother camps to their original ancestral homes. But the SGBV scenario seems to escalate with the struggle for land ownership between the people. Widows, single women, orphans and other vulnerable children are being denied access to land. In Acholi culture, women do not have control over land but can access it through the clan leaders and their husbands. The traditional justice system is not doing enough to protect the rights of women and children. Many NGOs are trying to support the local government by sensitizing the community about the need to promote and protect the fundamental human rights and provide justice through fair trials.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS SEXUAL AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN THE IDP CAMPS

- Strengthen capacity of community groups, CBOs, schools (including students, teachers, parents, PTAs) and Local Government to raise awareness on SGBV, causes and consequences, SGBV guiding principles and referral pathways for response.
- Work with SGBV protection committees, women groups and other community stakeholders to identify prevention strategies and support their implementation.
- Implement outreach activities with mobile teams in order to cover return sites.
- Build on the existing network services to develop referral pathways for survivors with due regard to confidentiality in return areas.
- Create an emergency hot line and provide emergency transport in order to respond to 100% of SGBV survivors to access medical and justice services.
- Develop strategies in conjunction with the Local Authorities and communities to increase ownership and sustainability.
- Develop a media strategy for public education and advocacy on SGBV.

- Conduct a research and study to generate data and information for effective planning, programming, advocacy and Policy advocacy
- Develop Advocacy strategy for dialogue and engagement with duty bearers for the prevention and protection of survivors and adequate dealings with perpetrators; law enforcement to prevent violation and punishment of perpetrators.
- Enhancing Sexual and Gender Based Violence sensitivity in Health Sector and Community Development Department.

Although Sexual and Gender Based Violence against women is a global problem, adequate and comprehensive SGBV programs are still lacking. All SGBV programs must include both prevention and response strategies in order to be most effective. Prevention activities target the root cause and contributing factors of SGBV while response activities target the consequences, or outcomes, of SGBV.

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